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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a cybernetic model of politeness strategies used in the process of making a request. The concept of systems, cybernetic models, and politeness strategies are reviewed, and the way they work together in the proposed model is examined. Politeness strategies are communication strategies used to change behavior enough to achieve goals while either maintaining the existing relationship or making a good impression. People use them to maximize the possibility of gain in requests. These strategies are used both in making a request and in any negotiation that accompanies the request. The proposed cybernetic model attempts to go beyond treating isolated communication variables, accounting for interaction and process in this context. (MSE)

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Politeness Strategies Used in Requests

--A Cybernetic Model--

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Politeness Strategies Used in Requests

--A Cybernetic Model--

Introduction

Requests are essentially a discourteous act in which the speaker (S) imposes on the hearer (H) to achieve the S's goal through communication (Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1978). This is a dynamic action because S needs to change H's condition in order to achieve his goal. If S asks H $20 and gets it, that means that H has lost $20, and his condition has been changed. If H's condition is not changed, S has not accomplished his goal.

People use politeness strategies to maximize the possibility of gain in requests without damaging the relationship with H. They are communication strategies to change H as much as possible in order to achieve S's goal and also maintain the relationship S and H have, or make good impression, if H is a stranger. In most cases, people do not damage the relationship much in making requests if they use an appropriate level of politeness.

Politeness strategies are not used only once when S makes a request, but also as S and H negotiate the request, since H wants to reduce the imposition without damaging the relationship. In this case, politeness strategies are used in the process of negotiation.

In this paper I will discuss a cybernetic model of politeness strategies in the process of making a request. I will review systems, cybernetic models and politeness strategies, and explain how they work together in the cybernetic model which I will present.

Literature Review

Systems

Systems are "interlinked sets of components hierachically organized into structural wholes which interact through time and space and are self-regulating yet capable of structural change" (Monge, 1977, p. 20). This means that if a complex phenomenon has a holistic properties, the behavior of that phenomenon cannot be discovered by analyzing the components separately. Knowledge about the interrelationships among components is also required.

The system approach allows the researcher to study the levels of interactions through their courses, which covering law approaches cannot. The covering law explains what causes politeness strategies at a point in time, but it does not explain how strategies are changed through the interactions.

There are three major ways to conceptualize systems: 1) general systems theory--an approach which seeks to classify systems by the way their components are organized and to derive typical patterns of behavior for the different classes of systems singled out by the taxonomy, 2) structural-functionalism--the practice of interpreting data by establishing their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated, and 3) cybernetics--the study of systems which communicate and exercise control over their own behavior.

These three different systems have different implications for research in communication and politeness strategies in requests, which is the focus on this paper. Cybernetics models are the most dynamic for explaining changes of interactions, and

they seem to be the best for this study, since requests are behavior which people regulate, alter or maintain.

Cybernetic System

Monge (1977) argues that cybernetic system has to possess the five logical conditions.

1. Goal parameters (reference signals) set in a control center.
2. Influence exerted by the control center, that is, an attempt to achieve the goal parameters in the part of the system being controlled.
3. Feedback provided to the control center, that is, information regarding the effects of the output on the part of the system being controlled.
4. Comparator test conducted by the control center, yielding an error signal.
5. Corrective action taken by the control center, if necessary.

Politeness Strategies in Making a Request

Politeness in making a request is a communication strategy which S uses to achieve S's goals and help maintaining a good relationship between S and H. S chooses the level of politeness based on the size of the request in order to reduce the imposition of the request. If S asks H for $100, the imposition is greater than if he asks for $20. However, if H carries out S's request, and H shares in the benefit or if only H gets benefit, the imposition will be smaller (Leech, 1983). If the room is very hot and S asks H to open the window, H also benefits. If S asks H to come to dinner, H benefits. If imposition is larger, a higher level of negative politeness is necessary to reduce im-

position. If S is not sufficiently polite, H still feels that the imposition is too great and is embarrassed. If S is too polite, H may feel that S is being sarcastic.

Brown and Levinson (1978) define politeness as maintaining the H's face, that is, being unimposed on and approved of in certain respects. Face refers to wants, and Brown and Levinson (1978) argued that we have two types of wants: ego-preserving wants and public-self preserving wants, which refer to people's desire to have others consider them contributing members of the society. The former generates negative face, and the latter, positive face.

Politeness not only decreases imposition on H but also increases approval from H for achieving the goal. Reducing imposition helps to keep a good relationship but increases the possibility of rejections. Thus, it is important to increase H's approval of S. Negative politeness is used for negative face (reducing imposition on H) by hedging, indirectness, giving deference, apologizing, impersonalizing S and H, giving H more freedom, etc. Positive politeness is used for positive face (increasing H's approval of S) by increasing high familiarity such as approval, showing interest in H, expressing group identity, asserting common ground, seeking agreement, making promises, joking, etc. (Craig, Tracy & Spisak, 1986).

The social distance between S and H (familiarity) and social status (power) also affect politeness strategies in requests (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Scollon & Scollon, 1983). S needs to use a higher level of politeness when asking for $20 from a

teacher (low familiarity) and from a parent (high familiarity). If S is more powerful than H, a lower level of politeness is necessary than when S is less powerful than H. If a boss and a subordinate ask H to do the same thing, the subordinate needs higher level of politeness.

Brown and Levinson argue that cultural variables affect politeness strategies, but they do not discuss this in detail. There are three important situational variables: necessity of request, H's ease to carry out request, and cultural variables.

If H understands that S has a great need to make the request, H feels that it is less of an imposition, and a low level of negative politeness is necessary. If S and H are at a cashier, and S finds that he does not have his wallet and asks H for $20 to pay the cashier, H understands the necessity of the request. However, if S asks H for $20 to pay a bill which he needs to pay in a week, the necessity of request is low because S can get the money some other way, such as borrowing it from a person that he is closer to. In the latter case, S needs a higher level of negative politeness as well as reasons for the request.

If a request is more difficult for H to carry out, the imposition is also greater, and a high level of negative politeness is necessary.

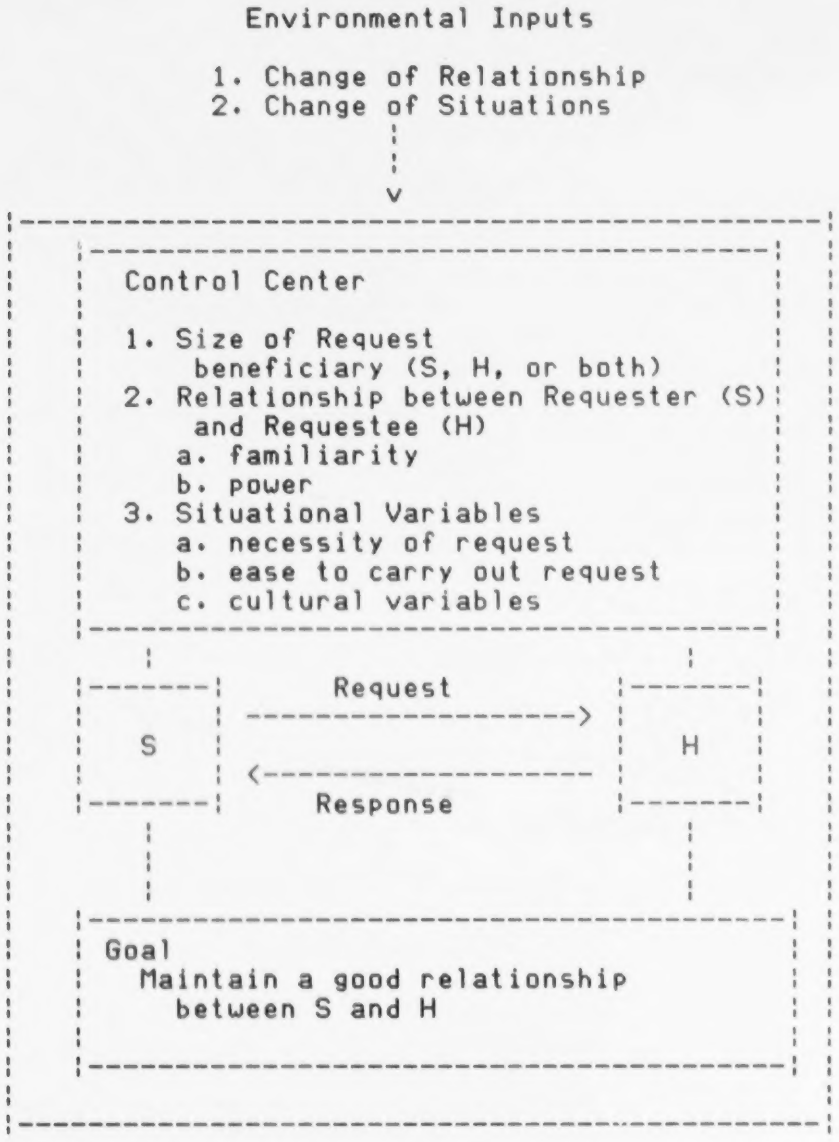
As for cultural variables, they vary much according to cultures. In Japanese culture, imposition caused by requests is, all else being equal, greater than in American culture, so Japanese use a higher level of negative politeness. In American

culture, solidarity is more important than in Japanese culture, a high level of positive politeness is necessary (Goldstein & Tamura, 1975).

Cybernetic Model of Politeness Strategies in Requests

Now I am going to present a cybernetic model of politeness

Figure 1: A Cybernetic Model of Requests



strategies in requests in Figure 1. A dyad, S and H, make a cybernetic system. I will show the model and how requirements are met in that model.

Components of the Model

Control center. In this model of politeness strategies, the control center consists of three major variables: 1) size of request (and who receives the benefit from the result), 2) relationship between S and H (familiarity and power), and 3) situational variables (necessity, ease to carry out requests, and cultural variables). These variables control imposition on H and also S's politeness strategies in requests as I have discussed in politeness strategy section.

Input to the Control Center. This cybernetic system is open and influenced by the environment. The control center changes all the time, because the relationship between S and H is changing, and also the situations in which S makes requests to H are different. Thus, this model obtains inputs, change of relationship and change of situations from the environment.

Control Center Influence. The control center influences the interactions between S and H. S's request messages are influenced by the size of requests, the relationship, and situational variables and include negative and positive politeness. H's response is also influenced by the control center.

Goal of Control Center. The goal of the system is to maintain the good relationship between S and H, not S's achieving of the request, which is just S's individual goal. S and H cooperate and maintain the good relationship. S also tries to

achieve the goal of the request, and H tries to reduce his loss. Both of them pursue the system's goal and their own individual goals. As long as they keep a good relationship, the goal of the system is achieved. If the relationship is damaged, the goal is changed. If they break the relationship, the system breaks down.

Negotiation of Requests

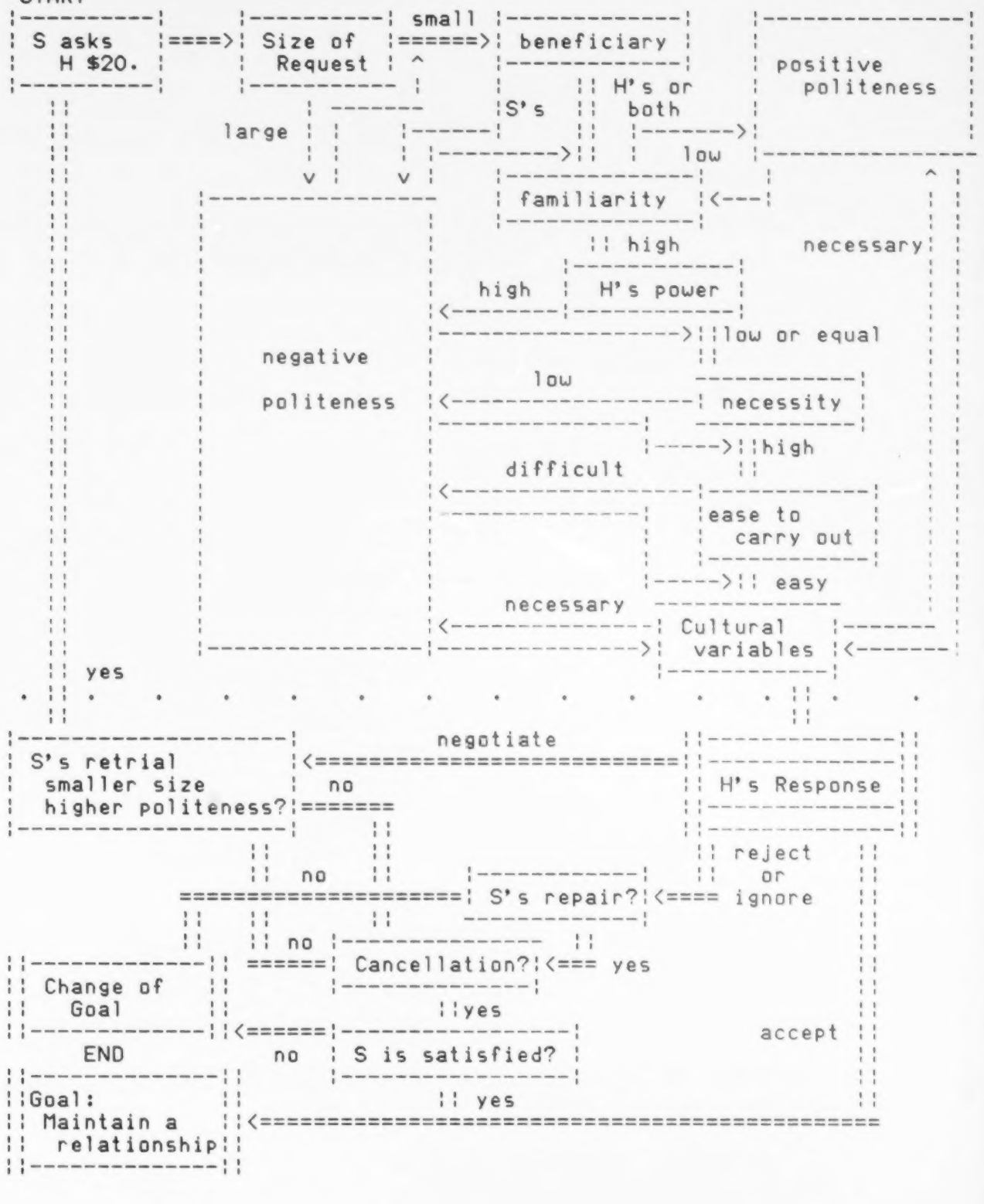
Now I am going to explain how a request is actually carried out and negotiated in the case of S asking H for $20 (Figure 2).

Making a request. The process of making a request is shown in the upper half of the figure, above the dotted line. S asks H for $20 at the left upper corner. He uses appropriate level of negative and positive politeness strategies based on the influence by the control center (the size of request, beneficiary, familiarity, power, necessity, ease, and cultural variables). The double lines show the flow, and whether negative politeness strategy is necessary or not is indicated. The order in which the variables are presented is not important; the decisions are probably made simultaneously.

Feedback to the control center. The feedback is H's response, in the middle of the right side. H accepts, negotiates, rejects, or ignores S's requests. If H accepts the request, the good relationship is maintained and the goal of the system is achieved (left bottom).

Detection of an error signal and corrective action to reduce error signal. In other cases, H threatens the relationship by rejecting or ignoring the request and S needs to retry a request

Figure 2: Negotiations of Request



with the higher level of politeness strategies or work on repair with reduction of the size of the request or even cancellation of the request through the negotiation with H.

H may negotiate to reduce the size of a request or even reject it. In these cases, S can try to increase the level of the politeness strategy (Case A), or reduces the size of the request (Cases B & C).

(Case A)

H: Well, $20 is a lot of money.
S: I know it is, but I need to pay it today. I'll get my salary next Monday, and I'll return it as soon as I get it. (high necessity and positive politeness)
H: OK. Here it is.

(Case B)

H: Well, $20 is a lot of money.
S: How about $10. That will do.
H: OK. Here it is.

(Case C)

H: Well, $20 is a lot of money.
S: I understand it is. But I do not have anybody else to ask. You are the only person I can ask this.
H: Let's see. I'm sorry, but I have only $10 now.
S: That will do.
H: Here it is.

If H rejects or ignores the request, he is threatening the relationship, and S needs to work on repairing it. The easiest way is to cancel the request, and if S is satisfied with the situation, the relationship is maintained.

(Case D)

H: I'd like to offer you $20, but I paid the bill yesterday and I do not have any money now.
S: Oh, I see.

Even if S cancels the request, if he is not happy with the

way H rejects or ignores the request, this may damage the relationship (change of the goal).

If S cannot cancel the request, he needs a higher level of politeness strategy and probably some reduction of the size of request, and then he can retry it. In this case, he needs a much higher level of politeness than the previous negotiation (Cases B & C).

If S does not repair the relationship, it will be damaged to some extent (change of goal).

Negotiation may be done several times (going around several times in the upper two-thirds of this figure). As long as they repair the relationship and both people are satisfied with the results, whether the request is carried out, partially carried out, or not carried out, the goal of the system is achieved. However, if the relationship is even slightly damaged, there is a change in the goal of the system. If strong dissatisfaction causes one person to decide to leave the relationship, the system breaks down.

Evaluation of System

In order to study this process, we could take a covering law perspective and seek variables which cause changes of politeness levels, but this does not explain the dynamic process of negotiation at all. It only explains how politeness levels are set when a request is made.

On the other hand, systems theory treats requests as a dynamic process rather than one static scene, which would reduce an obviously complex organization by analysis into individually

comprehensive units without regard to relationships among them. A systems model, however, is more difficult to operationalize and study than one developed from a covering-law perspective. Since systems inherently operate in a particular time sequence, an initial concern is the level of measurement.

Monge (1977) argues that the detection of error signal must be measured. In this model, a comparison of H's response (feedback) with the goal state must be measured. S's retrial, and repair also must be measured. There are a number of possible ways to approach this research. One would be to give participants a situation to role play with a confederate of the researcher. If the confederate was H, he would use previously-designated responses to the request. If the confederate was S, he would make different types of requests and see how H responded to different repair strategies. Another approach would be through self-reports of different situations.

The study of this model would not be easy. However, researchers could use relatively new techniques such as interaction analysis or path analytic techniques to identify the different kinds of messages being employed, as well as their relationships with other components in the model, and test the goodness of fit of the proposed model.

The cybernetic model of the politeness strategies in requests which I have proposed meets the necessary requirements. It has the potential to provide more valuable information about politeness strategies than the covering-law approach, which examines one dimension of variables in isolation.

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